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Patt Morrison Asks: The pill's author Carl Djerassi

Chemist Carl Djerassi created the oral synthetic hormone progesterone, which became the building block of oral contraceptives. (Joerg Sarbach / AP Photo)

The novelist and playwright who also midwifed the birth control pill.

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Any list of epochal dates in human history would be incomplete without Oct. 15, 1951, when chemist Carl Djerassi, working in Mexico City with his partner Luis Miramontes, created the oral synthetic hormone progesterone, which became the building block of oral contraceptives. For the first time, women could decide when sex would part company with procreation. For Djerassi the writer, that was another life ago.

Although he keeps his hand in as a professor emeritus at Stanford University, his passions have moved on. He endowed the Djerassi Resident Artists Program in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Yet even in his novels and plays, he is still the questing scientist who midwifed the pill.

The research you did that laid the groundwork for the pill was 60 years ago; you've spent the last 20 writing plays and novels. What can literature do for science that science can't do for itself?

I decided to go into literature to become an intellectual smuggler. There are few scientists who have bothered to communicate to the general public because the general public can't do anything for us. We write technical books and give lectures, and the only people who come are the people who know something about it, and that excludes the other 99% of the people I'd like to touch. I call it science-in-fiction. I decided to write a readable novel so people will learn something without realizing it. I don't announce this very loudly because people don't like to be educated in fiction, and particularly not in the theater.

In this country, anything to do with reproduction has become political, not scientific.

My enormous concern about America [is] the ever-increasing fundamentalism. It's not just a

religious fundamentalism. It's "don't confuse me with facts." I find it extremely disconcerting. It's probably the reason I'm spending roughly seven to eight months a year [in] London and Vienna, and only the winter in California -- teaching at Stanford, an interdisciplinary undergraduate course in chemistry and drama.

My response to [fundamentalism] was my play "Taboos." I take words -- marriage, family, baby, embryo. If you asked someone 20 or 30 years ago what they mean, they would have said, don't be silly. Now every one of these words means different things, and it's all politicized. The discussions after the play are vigorous and controversial. That's why I focus on plays. When you finish a book, it's set in stone. A play is never finished; you work with new directors, new actors. I find that very exciting.

You envision a world where every conception could be in vitro because that would mean every child is planned and wanted. A British newspaper called that "chilling." Personally, I don't think you went far enough. Why not an artificial womb, safe, monitored and transparent for all nine months?

I think this is nonsense. An Austrian magazine last month [discussed] an artificial placenta, where women just hand over the fertilized egg and nine months later they come and pick up [a baby]. There is research using goat fetuses; people [jumped] to your conclusion that it would happen to human beings. That's not why the researcher is working on it. He [wants] to see if you could take a premature fetus and maintain it for another four, five, six weeks, so it doesn't suffer from the effects extremely premature babies have. But to try to do it with an embryo is impossible. If a woman wants to have a child from her own egg and a partner's sperm but cannot or does not want to go through the pregnancy, there are surrogate mothers, thousands of them.

Your research work in Mexico **City wasn't about contraception.**

In the 1950s, birth control was not on the agenda of any pharmaceutical company or most people. The postwar generation wanted to have children. Then birth control became fashionable for about 10 or 15 years. Now, of the 20 largest pharmaceutical companies in the world, there's not a single one working on male contraception.

There was a window of opportunity in the 1960s -- you had hippie culture, drug culture, rock and roll culture and the initial flowering of the women's movement. It caused a certain liberalizing of sexual life.

That was the right time for contraceptives. If we'd done our work a few years later, I don't think we'd have any oral contraceptives.

And to those who say the pill is responsible for moral decline?

That is an oversimplification. My book "This Man's Pill" [asks] what if no pill had been invented? I think there would have been very few changes. People mistakenly assume that new technology causes social changes, rather than at times the reverse. In Japan, the pill was only legalized in 1999 and is not very popular there, [yet] Japan has all the issues we have: an aging population, postponing childbearing. The pill did separate contraception from sexual intercourse. [But] it's too simple to assume that pill and sexual conduct is cause and effect.

Books, plays, lectures, teaching -- to paraphrase Stanislavsky, what's your motivation?

My motivation is in part a bad one. What motivates scientists first of all is a good thing: curiosity. You want to solve problems and get answers. That's why we work 60, 80 hours a week.

But your ambition to be recognized -- we [scientists] are probably among the most ambitious of all the creative groups of people. We are the most collegial because we have to work in teams, but also among the most brutally competitive. In there is both the nourishment and the poison. To be honest, I'm not proud of this; I don't think it's good, but it's probably why I'm such a workaholic. This desire to retire I have never been able to understand. The idea of being intellectually occupied in your later years is important.

I would like to be recognized for the [literary] things I'm doing. I write to theaters; I don't even get an answer because I don't have an agent. Why? Agents are interested in 29-year-old Irish playwrights. I would be too, if I were an agent. So I have to [submit plays] myself. I understand they get hundreds of manuscripts, [but] they don't even acknowledge them.

The Djerassi artist residencies bring composers, writers and painters to California to create. Yet you've been frustrated trying to get your plays produced in California. Are we Philistines?

That's a very different thing. When you talk about the colony, when you talk about artists, it's a different context, a very different question.

[But] take for instance the theater scene in San Francisco. San Francisco is a lovely city, a very sophisticated city when it comes to science and such, but the theater scene is abysmal. It is a village. It has two or three major theaters and that's it. I remember coming back to San Francisco last year around the 15th of December. I wanted to go to the theater. I wanted to go to the opera, I wanted to go to the symphony. There was only one symphony; it was almost sold out, and all they were playing that week was Beethoven. There's nothing wrong with Beethoven, but here in Vienna, there are three opera companies. The main opera plays every day of the year, seven days a week, except July and August when people go to Salzburg. In London on the 15th of December,I could have gone to 37 different theaters.

But the answer is a very simple one: public money does not support theater [here] whereas in Europe and to a certain extent in England [it] gets supported by public [money]. In the United States, the question any theater director asks is how many characters do you have? If you have more than six they won't even look at it. A week ago I went to an [Arthur] Schnitzler play -- it had 31 characters. There's no theater in the United States, with the possible exception of Lincoln Center, that would be willing to consider such a thing.

You have a huge collection of Paul Klee's work. What attracted you to it?

Paul Klee is an infatuation from 60 years ago. He's one of the most versatile of all painters, much more so than people who are more famous. I had works of his that were done within a few weeks of each other, where you would never guess it is the same painter. To me he had the effect on painters that Wallace Stevens had on poets; Stevens was the poet's poet.

Your late wife, Diane Middleton, was an academic, a writer and a feminist. What does academia lose when women hit the glass ceiling?

That is a topic of every one of my books and plays. I do write about strong women. But the glass

ceiling is beginning to disappear -- that is, the fundamental problems [of] salary discrepancy and lower numbers of women in certain fields. The real problem, and why I'm so interested in reproductive issues, is that women have to juggle profession versus reproduction, where men don't. We don't yet offer the opportunities for sophisticated child care; we pay lip service. I proposed [to help women in academia with] money for very good child care. A lot of people said it's a good idea, but no one did anything about it.

You were on Richard Nixon's enemies list. Was that because of the pill or your politics?

Exclusively politics. Nixon had no hangups on [contraception]. The government attitude was [for] financial support, quite reasonable. [The enemies list] was my opposition to the Vietnam War. I was one of the California delegates for [George] McGovern [at] the Democratic convention in Miami.

Your native Austria issued a stamp of you. What's it like to see your own face on your mail?

It was a limited edition, only 400,000. But I say there are 400,000 people who've licked the back of my head and I don't even know them!

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This interview is edited and excerpted from a longer taped transcript. An archive of past interviews is at latimes.com/pattasks.

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